

ULSTER AMERICAN FOLK PARK



the  
mellon  
house

# **THE MELLON HOUSE**

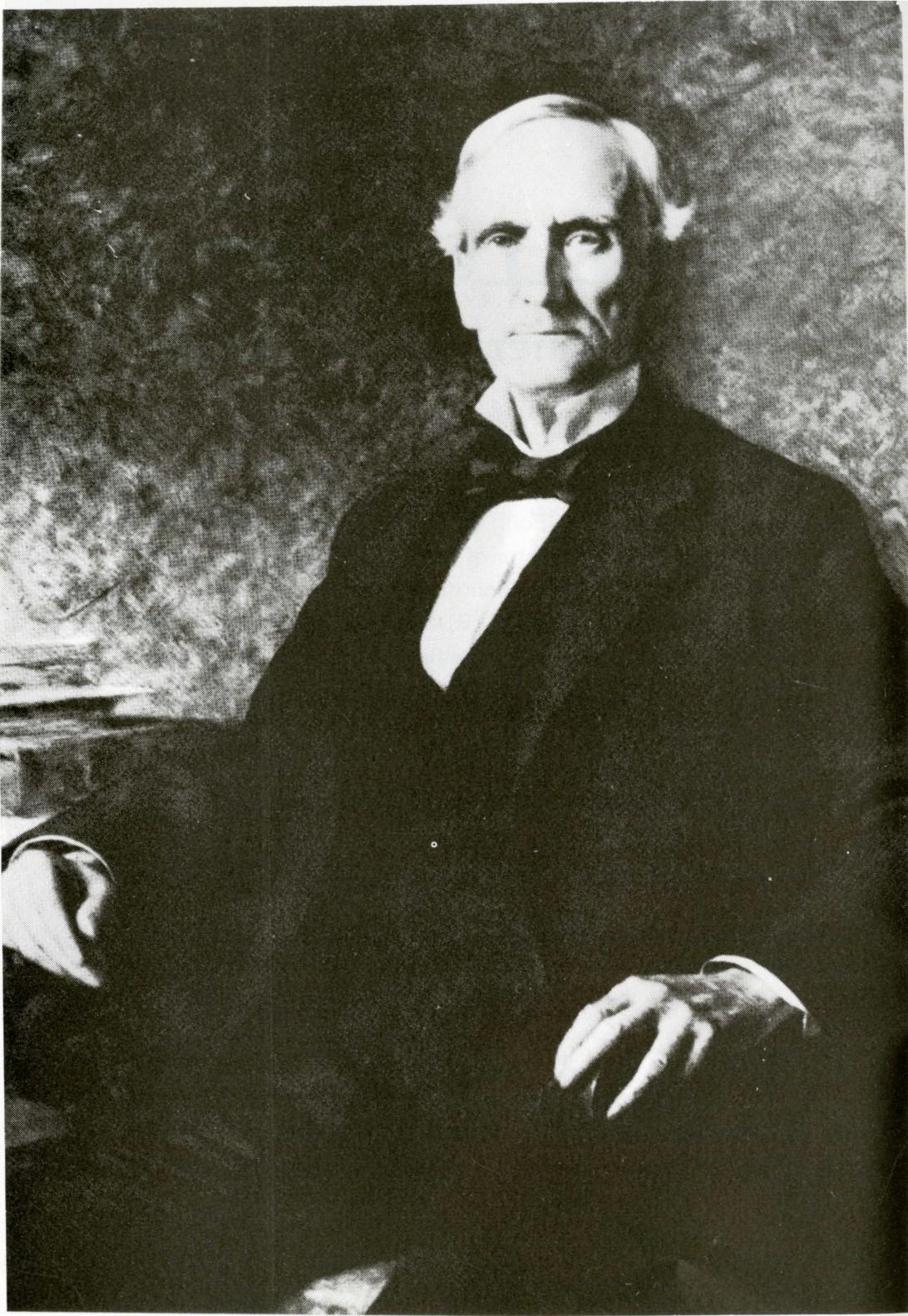
## **Ulster-American Folk Park**

The Ulster-American Folk Park is indebted to Mr. G. B. Thompson, O.B.E., Director of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, for the contribution on the structure of the house and to the late Professor E. R. R. Green, Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University, Belfast, for that on the Mellon family.

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## THOMAS MELLON

IT was in the year 1818 that the small farmers and hand-loom weavers of Ulster became convinced in overwhelming numbers that the prosperity they had gained during the long years of war with France would not return. Thirty-three-year-old Andrew Mellon, his wife, Rebecca, and their five-year-old son Thomas, were consequently only one of hundreds of families which thronged the west-bound ships to America. Although their journey was an arduous one, from Londonderry to Nova Scotia, then by another vessel to Baltimore, and finally a week overland by waggon to western Pennsylvania, they had friends and relations to welcome them on their arrival. Andrew's brothers, Armour and Thomas Mellon, had settled there as early as 1808 and they were eventually joined by their father and mother and seven more brothers and sisters.

Thomas Mellon grew up in an environment remarkably similar to the one which he had left. In the eighteenth century, Western Pennsylvania had been in the main settled by Scotch-Irish emigrants from Ulster, and Presbyterianism was the predominant religion. Nor was the unremitting toil of bringing the wilderness under cultivation all that much easier than trying to make the rent from a farm in remote and bushy Co. Tyrone. Although Thomas Mellon never wavered from the ideals of hard work and thrift and abstinence in which he had been brought up, he wanted a security which he believed the land would never give. Probably his imagination was fired by the success of his uncle Thomas who made a sizeable fortune for his time in New Orleans and retired to live in comfort. He claimed in later life that it was the discovery of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* which taught him that a poor boy need not remain poor.

Education was his means of escape from farm life. It has been said that: "Among the rude, crude men of his day, Thomas Mellon was a cultivated man endowed with a formidable intellect and a will as strong as the finest Pittsburgh steel". By his own unaided efforts he acquired an education, put himself through the West-



ern University of Pennsylvania (now the University of Pittsburgh), and read law in a Pittsburgh office.

His great-grandson, Dr. Matthew Mellon, quoting from the Judge's autobiography, said in his speech on 21st June, 1968, when the homestead was opened to the public :-

"The Judge was a hard worker and held that - 'the normal condition of man is hard work, self-denial, acquisition and accumulation; and as soon as his descendants are freed from the necessity of such exertion, they begin to degenerate in body and mind. - There is a great deal of humbug and nonsense afloat about people breaking themselves down with hard work. I have never known hard work to hurt anyone in good health and strength, if the work and will went together.'

"I have all my life avoided late hours and excesses, and have been a light eater of plain food, seldom using any stimulating beverage, and no tobacco. - I have never seen a horse race or a boat race, or played a game of cards in my life, or incurred any extra hazardous risks - never speculating in property of any kind without I saw a sure thing in it'."

Even while a student he "invested from time to time in little speculations in the purchase of small judgments, merchants' liens and like securities" and it was the money-making opportunities of a legal practice which interested him rather than the courtroom. He did spend ten years on the bench as a judge of common pleas, but once that was over he opened his bank and had no more to do with the law.

Thomas Mellon reaped the harvest of the post-Civil War boom. A lender could get twelve per cent for his money and as the Judge said " . . . it was easy to grow rich. One had only to buy anything and wait to sell at a profit". His bank, T. Mellon and Sons, was a one-room business in Smithfield Street in Pittsburgh to begin with "furnished with a long counter, a safe, a pot-bellied iron stove, a plain deal table and a couple of chairs". Yet the bank represented an important change in the fortunes both of the Mellon family and of Pittsburgh. When it was opened in 1870 the

In 1921 Andrew (A. W.) Mellon was appointed by President Harding as Secretary of the United States Treasury and continued under President Coolidge. He resigned sixty-two directorships to take on this post and devoted to it for eleven years the same energy and genius that he had devoted to business. He was acknowledged as the greatest financial mind in the U.S.A. and was hailed as the greatest Secretary of the Treasury since Alexander Hamilton.

As Secretary to the Treasury A. W. Mellon had been deeply involved in the complicated negotiations in connection with the inter-Allied War Debt following the First World War. It is an example of his ability and fairness in conducting the negotiations that he was a popular Ambassador to the Court of St. James, a post he took up in 1932.

In addition to being a business genius and a brilliant public servant, A. W. Mellon had a shrewd judgment of art. He donated his collection to the nation and it was the foundation of the American National Gallery, one of the world's greatest art collections. The National Gallery opened its doors in 1941, four years after his death.

## THE MELLON FARMSTEAD

The Mellon farmstead at Camp Hill, near Omagh, Co. Tyrone, was built by Thomas Mellon's father and uncle "chiefly by the labour of their own hands" shortly before his birth in 1813. It stood on a twenty-three acre farm cut out of his grandfather's land and when Thomas re-visited his birthplace in 1882, sixty-four years after he left it, he "found all as he had remembered it with no apparent change whatever". Six years before Thomas Mellon's return, one of his sons had brought back an accurate sketch of the cottage and out-house, which removes much of the mystery of how the old place had looked. A replica of the cottage was built in Pittsburgh by James Ross Mellon and approved by the Judge himself. The Judge's great-grandson, Dr. Matthew Mellon, as well as many other members of the family, had visited Camp Hill and brought back photographs dating from 1902 to 1968 which made the restoration comparatively easy.

Restoration on the Mellon farmstead (at Camp Hill) began by determining what alterations to the buildings had been made. The conclusion was that the Mellon farmstead was originally a standard unit comprising a two-roomed dwelling house (kitchen and bedroom) with probably two detached blocks of out-houses.

The stone-built dwelling house measures 48 feet in length by 16 feet in width. A door, in the centre of the front facade, gave access to a spacious kitchen measuring 16 feet by 16 feet with a sizable hearth sited against the gable. Another door led out to the back of the house. The original floor was almost certainly of hardened clay but the hearth area seems to have been cobbled with stones. It was on this cobbled hearth that the turf fire burned.

This was the 'heart' of the house ; the food was cooked here in pots suspended from an iron crane pivoted at the left hand side of the hearth opening, and here in the evening the leisure hours were spent.

To the left of the kitchen is the original bedroom, now a par-



lour, measuring 13 feet by 16 feet with a small bedroom off it. The second bedroom, added to the house in the post-Mellon period of its history, was in typical fashion constructed as a gable extension from the hearth or the south end of the house, and a door was opened to it through the gable at the right hand side of the hearth. The floor above the original bedroom appears to be a later development. The floor joists rest on a longitudinal wall which subdivides the original bedroom into two compartments. The upper floor is accessible from the kitchen, presumably by a moveable step-ladder to a door in the central transverse wall, and the room space is dimly lit by a small window in the north gable.

The roof of the house is supported on couples – inverted V-shaped components – resting on the tops of the main longitudinal walls. The couples are connected by rough-hewn beams fixed at convenient intervals parallel to the long axis of the house. Over these beams at right angles is placed a network of fine rods to provide a base for a layer of sod or “scraw”, cut rather like lengths of stair carpet and laid in a series of overlapping strips to cover the complete roof area and provide a base for the thatch. This is of the scollop variety, the straw being stapled to the sod underlay by bent hazel or willow rods. The house has been refurnished so as to approximate to its appearance in 1881 when Judge Thomas Mellon re-visited it.

The original out-houses, which together with the dwelling comprised the complete farm unit, probably consisted of a small cow byre, a stable, a piggery and a store. One of these buildings became a two-storey slated building with a byre and calf houses occupying the ground floor and a hay shed and barn above.

Today, as part of the restoration project, a horse thresher made by Henderson's of Omagh has been installed to replace a similar threshing machine in use until comparatively recently but subsequently broken up. The space in the barn houses a collection of farm implements illustrating both local craftsmanship and imported American types.

The out-house at right angles to the dwelling has been recon-



structed as part of the restoration, and comprises two rooms, one of which now houses a series of dairying utensils collected in the surrounding district. To the north of the dwelling an open-fronted turf and cart shed, at the end of which is a small stable, has been repaired and re-roofed with thatch.

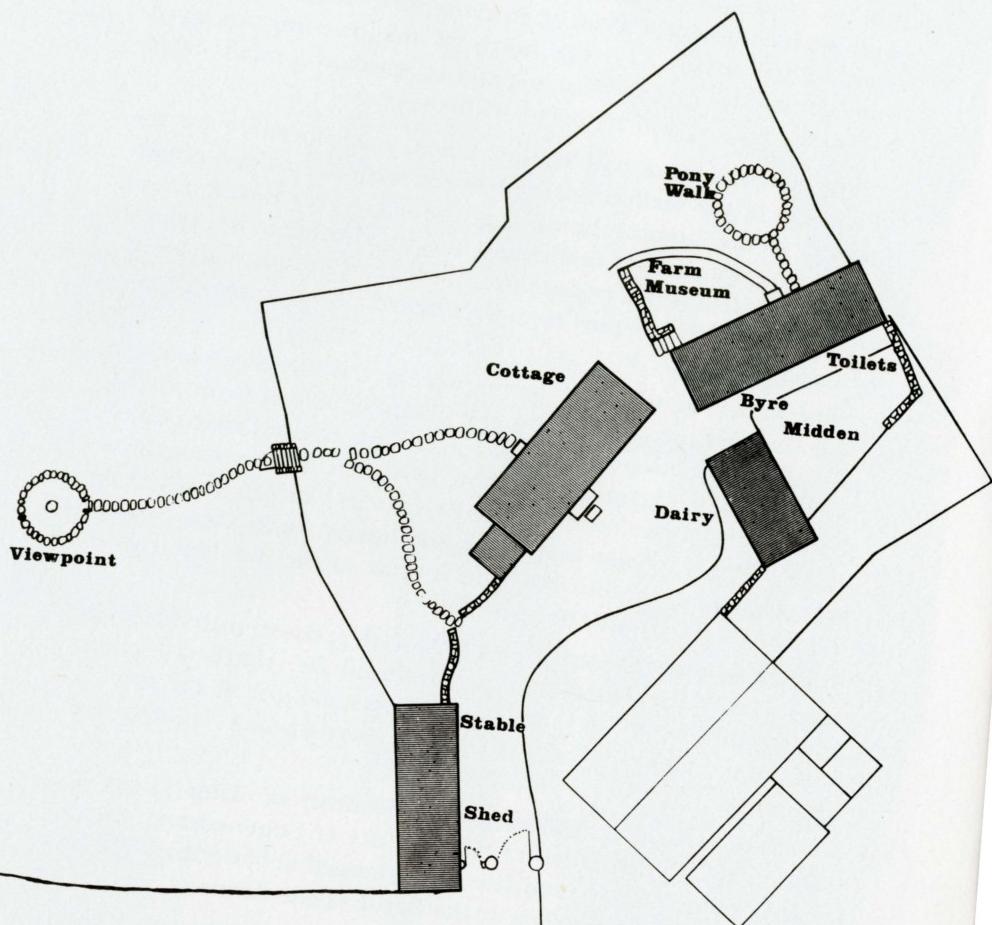
The restoration of the Mellon home, made possible by the generosity of the Mellon family, has achieved at least two objectives. It is the humble home from which a very distinguished Ulster-American family originated; and in addition it is a typical farm of the area which evolved over more than a century of occupation, but which has now been superseded through the progress of agriculture.

The valley in which it lies is one of the meeting places of Ulster history, an area where the planters, mainly Scottish, advanced their frontiers in face of inhabitants whose Celtic culture stretched back to antiquity. Alike hardened by the struggle to win existence from none too fertile soil, and driven at intervals by a common hunger and desire for liberty, both these strains were to make a significant contribution to the development of the North American continent.

There is a magnificent view of the dark green countryside from Camp Hill just behind the farmstead and Dr. Matthew Mellon, great-grandson of the judge, made a personal gift of the sundial and stone viewpoint on which the surrounding features are described.

There is a long tradition that the army of King James II, which in 1689 had failed to take the city of Londonderry, after a siege of one hundred and five days, camped about Camp Hill on its way to its fateful defeat at the Battle of the Boyne.

An even longer tradition stretching back one thousand years links Camp Hill with the Vikings – Norsemen and Danes – who ravaged, plundered and in part settled Ireland from the ninth to the twelfth century.



residence will be surrounded by extensive lawns and walks with  
driveway, paved-pavilion and small gatehouse at the entrance. The residence  
will also have a large garage. A small hill will be left untouched near the  
dwelling site to become shrubs, notwithstanding the proposed construction.

#### **Plan of the Mellon house and farmstead**

The Mellon House was purchased by members of the Mellon family and presented by them to the Scotch-Irish Trust. It now forms part of the Ulster-American Folk Park, an outdoor museum of emigration, which opened to the public in 1976.

